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ABSTRACT

Problems in the translation of Judeo-Spanish texts go beyond the problems normally associated with translation. Aside from near-native control of two languages, the translator must have knowledge of vocabulary that is not completely Spanish and an understanding of the unique orthographic history of the Judeo-Spanish dialect. There are Spanish words that have a different meaning in Judeo-Spanish, creating potential for confusion. In addition, Judeo-Spanish vocabulary has been derived from many other languages, including Greek, Bulgarian, Rumanian, Serbo-Croatian, Turkish, Hebrew, French, and English. Regional variations in Judeo-Spanish also occur. In some cases, words from two languages have become fused to create a new form. The writing system presents problems for translation because until the 18th century, the Hebrew alphabet was often used even to write Spanish texts, with adjustments for elements occurring in Spanish but not in Hebrew. Representation in the Roman alphabet is difficult. Ideally, it requires selection of a single set of orthographic conventions but historically and currently, transcription systems vary. Diacritic markings, common in Spanish, are uncommon in English. The translator must be able to use and justify a transcription system when necessary. (MSE)

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Problems of Translation of Judeo-Spanish Texts

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Let me begin by making a distinction between two terms, often used synonymously by Sephardim themselves. I use Judeo-Spanish to refer to the daily spoken language. Although many Sephardim call their language Ladino, I prefer--at least at the moment--to use that term for the Hebrew calque hagiolanguage which is used for the translation of religious texts from Hebrew. Please do not assume that, in making the same distinction as Haim Vidal Séphiha, I am necessarily supporting his point of view. I make that distinction here for the sake of clarity.

The problems involved in the translation of Judeo-Spanish texts are multiple, and not limited to problems of translation from one language to another in general. A translator normally needs native or near-native control of two languages, but in the case of Judeo-Spanish, more knowledge is necessary, because neither vocabulary nor syntax come completely from Spanish.

Because of time and length considerations, this paper will not discuss the syntactic problems. In terms of vocabulary, there are Spanish words which have a different meaning in Judeo-Spanish. For example, negro is 'black' in Spanish, but generally means 'bad' or 'evil' in Judeo-Spanish. The Spanish escapar is cognate to English 'escape', but in Judeo-Spanish it means 'to finish'.

Some of the vocabulary problems involved in a confrontation of Spanish and Judeo-Spanish are mentioned in a humorous and nostalgic fashion by Hank Halio in his "Ladino Reverie" column in

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the Sephardic Home News of March, 1990. That particular column deals with the time in his childhood when Sephardic immigrants were well enough established that housewives could afford the luxury of someone to help with the housecleaning once a week. He talks about the wonderful luck that his mother had in finding a Spanish-speaking Mexican woman for that job, but then discusses the linguistic confusion that resulted from the fact that the two women spoke two different dialects of Spanish--Mexican and Levantine Judeo-Spanish. Here is his summation of the situation:

> Mom's usage of Ladino baffled Margarita to the extent that she knew that Mom was speaking Spanish, but it was a type that she was only vaguely familiar with. Some of the words Mom used were Turkish, and those words were what really threw Margarita. Another bone of contention was the usage of ESKAPAR, that word to us means to finish, but in conventional Spanish it means to ESCAPE. (p. 2)

Many languages have contributed to the Judeo-Spanish vocabulary. A limited discussion of those extra-Hispanic contributions to just Levantine Judeo-Spanish would include words from Greek, Bulgarian, Rumanian, Serbo-Croation and, especially, Turkish. Bulgarian words generally refer to military life (polkovnic 'colonel') or secular education (doskel 'teacher'). Turkisms are found in all areas, but especially in reference to business, labor and government (charshi 'market', paras 'money', boyaji 'painter', hukiumet 'court'). Turkish words also are used for customs which the Jews adopted from their neighbors (haman or hamam 'Turkish bath'), and to name kitchen utensils and parts of a

house (filjan 'cup', tavan 'roof'). Many plants and animals also have Turkish names (konja 'rose', bilbil 'nightingale'--although this word more commonly appears with a Spanish diminutive suffix as bilbilico.[1]

Frequent cases of the fusion of Turkish elements with elements from other languages are seen, as the case of bilbilico which was just mentioned. Turkish batak 'mud' takes on a Spanish prefix em- and Spanish verb endings to give embatacar 'to muddy, get dirty'. There are even cases where elements from three languages are fused in Levantine Judeo-Spanish. Starting with the name of the Hebrew holiday of Purim, Judeo-Spanish adds the Turkish suffix -lik and the Spanish -es plural ending to give the word purimlikes 'Purim presents'.[2]

As can well be expected in a Jewish language, there is a great deal of Hebrew-Aramaic influence, especially in terms related to religious life (haham 'wise man', kavod 'honor'). In some cases, Hebrew words were used as roots of words which were then combined with Spanish elements as, for example, Hebrew herem 'excommunication', which gives the verb enheremar 'to excommunicate', or the Hebrew expression ba'al habayit 'home owner', which became balabay in popular speech and then took on a Spanish feminine ending to give balabaya 'homemaker'. There are common expressions which contain both Spanish and Hebrew words: hacer kavod 'to honor' and tomar sar 'to become sad', for example.[3]

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, French elements became common in Judeo-Spanish, especially in the territory of the

Ottoman Empire. By that time the Alliance Israélite Universelle had set up schools in the areas of the Sephardic diaspora, and Sephardim were receiving their education in French. This, of course, means that many of those who wrote--especially scholarly works--were more comfortable writing in that language, so that we have products such as Joseph Nehama's Dictionnaire du Judéo-Espagnol, with all definitions in French.

French had infiltrated Judeo-Spanish by the end of the nineteenth century to the point that the language spoken by people in Turkey was referred to not as Judeo-Español, but as Judeo-Fragnol. Here is a quote from the forthcoming English translation of Paloma Díaz-Mas' book, Los sefardíes, which illustrates the phenomenon quite well:

> Young women whose names had been Mazal Tov (Hebrew 'good luck') or Clara started to call themselves Fortuné and Cler; young men were no longer Ya'acov or Abraham, but rather Jac or Alberto. Of course the speech of these franqueados was replete with words, phrases and even syntax modeled on French. They were muziús (French 'monsieur') and mamuazeles (French 'mademoiselles') who no longer se interesaban a (French s'intéresser à as opposed to Spanish interesarse por) the same aferes (from French affaires rather than Spanish asuntos) as their parientes (French parents vs. Spanish padres) and their lives dezvelopaban (French developper vs. Spanish desarrollar) in a manner very different from the tradicionel (French traditionnel, Spanish tradicional) so

regretada (French regretter, Spanish añorar 'pine for, miss' by their elders . . .[4]

By contrast, Moroccan Judeo-Spanish, known as Haketia, shows other influences. Gallicisms are rarer than in the Levantine dialect, possibly because of closer contact with Peninsular Spanish over the centuries, there are no Italianisms or loan-words from Balkan languages or Turkish, but occasional Anglicisms occur, such as tippah from English 'teapot', perhaps because of the influence of British Gibraltar. Arabic influence is very strong, appearing in both vocabulary and phonetics.[5]

But polylingualism is only part of the difficulty. The writing system presents another series of knotty problems to the translator, because quotes in Judeo-Spanish are often included in the original, along with their translation, to allow the Sephardim to speak in their own voice, but in the alphabet used for the translation. In the Middle Ages, when illiteracy was common even among the nobility, Jewish males had to be able to read Hebrew for religious purposes. Consequently, those Jews who knew how to write did so using the Hebrew alphabet, and that is how Judeo-Spanish was traditionally written. Representing a Spanish text in the Hebrew alphabet is known as aljamiado writing. As is the case in Yiddish, adjustments were made to indicate vowels and other sounds which existed in Spanish but not in Hebrew.

These adjustments to the Hebrew alphabet for aljamiado were done on an ad hoc basis during the Middle Ages. It was not until the eighteenth century that the Sephardic printing industry made them into a true, coherent system, with surprising phonetic

accuracy.[6] But how do we resolve the way in which those words are to be represented in the Roman alphabet? Do we write **š-a-l-o-m** with a hachek above the s-, as is common in Spain since the /sh/ sound does not exist in contemporary Spanish, do we use the more common English spelling of **s-h-a-l-o-m**, do we, in deference to French influence on the language, write **c-h-a-l-o-m**, or do we follow Turkish practice and write the word as **ş-a-l-o-m**?

Realizing that the language is a form of Spanish, would it be advisable to retain Spanish spelling conventions, and write the word que as **q-u-e**, or is the more phonetic **k-e** a better representation? What transcription of bushkimos will offer the fewest obstacles to the greatest number of readers? The /sh/ sound can be represented in at least four ways: **š, ş sh, ch**, and the syllable /ki/ could appear as **k-i** or **q-u-i**.

The use of diacritics is problematic. For Spaniards, the use of diacritics is normal and they register in the readers' minds. English speakers, however, are so unaccustomed to diacritics that many people do not know where to put an apostrophe when they write.

Aljamiado Judeo-Spanish uses a diacritic--a tick, called a rafé--above certain consonants to indicate a change in pronunciation. For example, Hebrew beth normally represents the bilabial /b/, but with a rafé it becomes the labiodental /v/. Zayin is /z/, but the rafé changes it to /j/ as in jente.

Spanish uses a written accent mark for several purposes. One is to indicate stress, and stress can be semantically significant: hablo, stressed on the first syllable, means 'I am speaking', but

when the second syllable receives the stress, habló means 's/he spoke'. The combination of i or u with another vowel normally forms a single syllable, a diphthong, in Spanish; breaking that diphthong into two syllables is indicated by a written accent mark over the i or u--again, a semantically-significant difference, as between hacia 'toward' and hacía 'I, s/he used to do'. Both are spelled identically except for the accent mark.

In aljamiado, both hablo and habló are written alef-beth with rafé-lamed-vav, and it is left to the context to tell the reader which syllable gets stressed. Is it legitimate in transcribing _____ to **a-v-l-o** to use an accent mark when the form should be pronounced /avló/? Hacia and hacía may well be transcribed as **a-s-y** or **i-a**, but how can we indicate the semantically-significant hiatus? Aljamiado indicates it by using a silent alef between the two vowels, so that hacia will appear as alef-sin or samekh-yod-hay, whereas hacía will be written as alef-sin or samekh-yod-alef-hay. Do we transcribe hacía as **a-s-i-'-a**, **a-s-í-a**, or **a-s-i-y-a**? And what about the initial silent h- which is used for both words in Spanish, but which does not appear in aljamiado?

The obvious problem here is the lack of uniformity in the transcription of aljamiado Judeo-Spanish in the Roman alphabet. If there were a single system generally accepted for such transcriptions, that would certainly help translators. At least we would know how to represent specific sounds. But because translators and readers have widely differing linguistic backgrounds, and are accustomed to specific ways of spelling given sounds according to their native languages, it is virtually

impossible to agree on a given transcription system which would be accepted outside the bounds of any given linguistic community.

Problems in the translation of Judeo-Spanish texts, then, go well beyond the problems we normally associate with the process of translation. They require a vocabulary which can come from several languages (not all of which have equal influence in various regional dialects of Judeo-Spanish), and a linguistic background such that the translator can use a justifiable transcription system where necessary.

[1]Paloma Díaz-Mas, Los sefardíes: historia, lengua y cultura (Barcelona: Riopiedras Ediciones, 1986), 109-110.

[2]Díaz-Mas, pp. 110-111.

[3]Díaz-Mas, pp. 108-109.

[4]The translation, by this author, is scheduled for publication by the University of Chicago Press in 1992. This quote is from chapter III, pp. 111-112 in the original.

[5]Díaz-Mas, pp. 116-117.

[6]Díaz-Mas, p. 126.